

Starting a Prison Braille Program

In the U.S. today, there are about 40 braille production facilities operating within prison walls. Both men and women inmates learn braille, a six-dot system of reading and writing used by people who are blind, and earn Literary Braille Certification from the National Library Services for the Blind and Physically Handicapped of the Library of Congress (referred to as NLS). They can then transcribe print material into tactile (touchable) dots for braille readers. Advanced certifications – for Math and Science braille, textbook formatting, proofreading, and more – can also be earned. Advanced certifications lead to broader market opportunities and higher income, both for individual transcribers and prison braille programs.

Professionals managing these programs describe them as “win-win” initiatives, since all parties involved benefit in some meaningful way. Inmates gain valuable job skills prior to leaving prison, and many “graduates” of prison braille programs go on to become independent braille transcribers working from their own homes following release. Braille readers have access to more high quality materials in this accessible media. This is especially true for students who are blind and need textbooks in braille.

Just as every prison is different, with its own staff, rules, regulations, and culture, every prison braille program is unique. For that reason, a “one size fits all” description will not work in every correctional facility. These guidelines for starting a prison braille program should be used as a road map of important issues to address, and each program should be customized to meet the needs of the institution that houses it.



Key Ingredients When Starting a Prison Braille Program

- **Agreement among key agencies and officials to explore establishing a program.**

All prison braille programs operate – to one degree or another – as partnerships between individual correctional facilities and at least one agency working to provide braille materials for people who are blind. Other correctional or vision agencies may become partners as well. For example, in Kentucky, the KCI (Kentucky Correctional Industries) Braille Services prison braille program operates as a partnership between the prison in which it is housed – Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women (KCIW), KCI, and the American Printing House for the Blind in Louisville, KY, located about 30 minutes from the prison.

► **Conduct market research: Identify institutions and agencies that purchase braille materials for people who are blind, as well as direct links to braille readers.**

Local and state public school systems, state schools for the blind, public and private colleges, and government and non-profit agencies serving people who are visually impaired would all be excellent groups to contact to determine the market for braille transcription services in your area. Local, state, and national providers of braille should all be explored. Restaurants, museums, hotels, and utilities should provide materials in braille for those who read this medium. A list of these potential “customers” should be included in the marketing plan you develop.

An important component of this market research is to find out whether or not the state in which the prison will be housed allows products and services to be sold beyond state borders. Laws in this area will set the parameters for your customer base. If sales are limited to in-state entities, the program may not generate as much business as it could if sales could be offered nationwide.

► **Secure leadership support from partnering agencies.**

It is imperative that the warden at the correctional facility in which the program will be housed supports the prison braille program and is willing to let vision professionals enter the prison regularly, bring supplies into the program, and transport completed braille materials out of the prison. The president or CEO of the vision agency or superintendent of a school for the blind must also support the program and this partnership. If any other agencies are involved, their leaders must sign on.



► **Identify goals for the program and for each partner.**

An example of a program goal could be – to establish a successful business that produces excellent quality materials for braille readers. A corrections facility goal could be – to educate, rehabilitate, and prepare offenders for reentry by providing them with opportunities to gain job skills, discover their own talents and skills, and establish a viable career path following release. A vision agency goal could be – to develop a team of highly qualified braille transcribers who will produce quality braille materials, especially textbooks for students who are blind in grades K-12.

► **Decide under what auspices the prison braille program will operate within the correctional facility.**

Prison braille programs can function well as either educational/vocational programming, or as correctional industries businesses. This decision is typically based on the partners involved and the overall goals of the program. Educational/vocational programs are considered primarily to be a learning experience to build vocational skills. As such, inmates in educational/vocational prison

braille programs are typically not paid for their time, and braille transcription services can be offered to customers at no cost.

Correctional industries programs are designed to not only educate inmates and prepare them for careers upon reentry, but also to be self-sustaining business operations. Inmate transcribers in correctional industries are typically paid while learning and working, and customers are charged for braille transcription services. If the program will be a correctional industries business and inmates in the state can be paid, a pay scale should be established.



There are many examples of both educational/vocational and correctional industries prison braille programs throughout the National Prison Braille Network. If you would like a referral to individual program managers to gather information, contact APH here: jhawkins@aph.org.

► **Determine the size and scope of the program, as well as the services the program will provide.**

The KCI Braille Services program started in 2000, with the capacity to employ 15 women in a correctional industries setting. In 2017, it expanded to include 20 positions. Prison braille programs can operate with very few inmates (3-5). As of 2017, the largest known program in the U.S. is Mountain View Braille Services in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice where 100 female inmates participate in the program.

Some programs offer services for people with visual impairments in addition to braille transcription, such as large type printing, audio recordings, and eye glass repair and distribution.

► **Secure financial and in-kind support needed.**

Typically, financial and in-kind support comes from the partnering agencies establishing a prison braille program. If outside funding is needed, local Lions Clubs can be approached, since they specifically fund projects that benefit people who are blind and visually impaired. Private foundations can also be a source of grant funding to start a program. Look for foundations that support programs for people with vision loss.

► **Prison personnel must determine that qualified inmates will be available to work in the program.**

Although inmate qualifications for these programs vary from prison to prison, typical participants have at least a high-school education or GED, know how to operate a computer, have at least 5-8 years left to serve on their sentence, are highly motivated to learn new skills, and have not broken any prison rules for at least a year. It is advised that inmates who have been in prison for less than 1-2 years not participate in a prison braille program, since they may not have fully adjusted to prison life.



► **Identify a dedicated, secure space where the program will be located within the prison.**

The size and specifications of the space will be determined by how many inmates the program plans to employ, and the scope of services offered. In a typical program, each transcriber trainee has a work station including a desk and computer. Larger work areas are dedicated to tactile graphics design and production, embossing and thermoforming, and assembling textbook pages. Since embossers can be very loud when operating, they should be separated

from transcribers whenever possible. Space should also be available to store paper, supplies, tools, and equipment.

► **Recruit and hire a qualified professional to teach braille and manage all braille aspects of the business.**

This is typically the responsibility of the vision agency partnering in the prison braille program. For instance, this could be with a full-time or part-time job. It could be a faculty or staff member for the school or agency who agrees to work at the prison part-time.

► **Assign corrections personnel to provide security and routine maintenance for the program.**

In Kentucky, the manager of Kentucky Correctional Industries at the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women is responsible for security at the prison braille program site, and for ensuring that inmates in the program adhere to all prison rules and regulations. Security should always be provided by correctional facility or industry staff, since they are well trained on prison security and safety.

► **Include an annual Open House for the prison braille program that will be supported by all partners.**

Georgia Braille Transcribers at Central State Prison in Macon, GA, has a long established and very successful Open House each year. Inmate transcribers prepare a program describing their work in the prison braille program, the impact it has on their lives and the impact it has on braille readers in the state. Elected officials, including members of Congress and the Governor and his wife are invited, as are corrections officials and vision professionals from throughout the state, and local media outlets. This provides an excellent public relations opportunity and builds good will and support for the program.

- **Create a contract or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among partners that all parties have agreed to and signed.**

This agreement should include:

- A program description: location, size, scope of services, work hours, staffing, start date, etc.;
- Partner roles, goals, and responsibilities, including a decision-making hierarchy and troubleshooting processes;
- Clearly outlined financial responsibilities and a bookkeeping system;
- Ownership of equipment and software in the program.

To see a sample Memorandum of Understanding contact APH: jhawkins@aph.org.

Conclusion

The American Printing House for the Blind (APH) in Louisville, KY, has coordinated the National Prison Braille Network since 2001. APH tries to maintain a directory of prison braille programs across the country, and hosts an annual gathering of corrections and vision professionals in Louisville each October, called the National Prison Braille Forum, to discuss the challenges and benefits these programs offer. If someone you know could benefit from joining the network (at no charge), please send them this membership information and application form to complete: <http://www.aph.org/pbf/membership/>.

Jayma Hawkins is the National Prison Braille Network Coordinator at APH. She can be reached via email at jhawkins@aph.org, or via phone at 502-899-2302.

*Nancy Lacewell, American Printing House for the Blind
nlacewell@aph.org*

